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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 000423

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SUBJECT: IS TAJIKISTAN'S ISLAMIC PARTY AT A CROSSROADS?

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CLASSIFIED BY: TRACY A. JACOBSON, AMBASSADOR, EXE, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Tajikistan's new religion law puts Tajikistan's Islamic Revival Party in a difficult position. The party's inability to influence either the legislative process or the government's religious policy, calls into question its reason for being. The party's silence on major issues challenges its relevance. While the party ranks continue to grow, some wonder whether party members will start questioning the party's leadership. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan remains the largest opposition party, and it is the only opposition party that has representatives in Tajikistan's parliament (two members of the lower house). However, recent events have challenged the party's claims to relevance. The party was unable to prevent passage of a restrictive religion law, and it has been unable to influence government officials implementing the country's religious policy. Party leaders have been quiet on electoral reform, and were relatively passive in raising allegations of fraud in a recent by-election in Dushanbe. For the second straight year, party leaders did not exploit government missteps during winter crises to boost the party's image or position.

#### THE RELIGION ISSUE

¶3. (C) In 2008, Islamic Revival Party Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri, as one of the party's two parliamentary deputies, introduced his own version of the religion law, as a counter-measure to the government's controversial version (which was ultimately adopted). Kabiri said at the time that his version of the law was never submitted for discussion by the relevant parliamentary committee; parliament was dominated by President Rahmon's supporters, and the deputies were pressured into considering only the government's version. On March 5, when parliament passed the government's version - with little or no debate - Kabiri was in Bishkek on a business trip.

¶4. (C) PolAssistant witnessed an exchange about this sequence of events between Kabiri and Davlat Usmon, a former Deputy Chairman of the party, at a social gathering on March 30. Usmon told Kabiri that "it is high time for the party to be more active." Usmon criticized Kabiri for not cutting his business trip short

and returning for the vote, at least as a symbolic act. Usmon reminded Kabiri that Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, one of the few independent deputies in the upper house, cut short his trip to Libya to add his voice in protest to the law. Kabiri responded to Usmon by explaining that he had tried to work with the Chairman of the lower house on the legislation without success, and that his presence would not have prevented the law's passage.

¶ 15. (C) In a private conversation, Kabiri said a public discussion of the law could do nothing more than "complicate social tranquility," and that if there were social disturbances, the Islamic Revival Party would get the blame. He did not see any way to change the government's religious policy, and he thought it would be better for the party to position itself between the government and the religious community, to try to "soften or release tension between the two."

¶ 16. (C) During a March 31 conversation with PolOff, Abdullo Rahnamo, a respected analyst at the Strategic Research Center who was on the same trip in Libya with Turajonzoda when the latter flew home to vote against the law, commented that the passage of the religion law challenged the fundamental reason for the party to exist. The essential purpose of the party is to represent the religious community; "if the party cannot protect the religious community, what does the party stand for?"

#### THE ELECTION ISSUE

¶ 17. (C) The religion law is not the only major issue facing the  
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party. Parliamentary elections are set to take place in early 2010, and if a recent by-election for a parliamentary seat representing one of Tajikistan's largest constituencies is any indication, the future is not bright for a free and fair process. In early February, the government claimed that a member of President Rahmon's party received 91% of the vote to the Islamic Revival Party candidate's 7%, and that turnout was 70%. International observers from the OSCE and the EU reported numerous irregularities, and estimated that turnout was closer to 10-15%. Just after the by-election, Hikmatullo Saifullozoda, the Islamic Revival Party's spokesman, and Muhammadali Hait, the party's Deputy Chairman, held a press conference, claiming victory, complaining about the irregularities, and vowing to challenge the announced results in court. A local court rejected the party's claims, and the party has filed an appeal.

¶ 18. (C) In early March, PolOff hosted a lunch for Sughd regional Islamic Revival Party representatives during a trip to Isfara. The representatives were concerned about the by-election results, and asked the U.S. Embassy to "tell the government to pass a new election law" because they had no ability to do it themselves. In responding, PolOff noted that the party had the potential to take a proactive role in advocating for electoral changes, as it has two parliamentary representatives, a newspaper and public relations department, and a growing (and significant) support base. One of the representatives argued that Kabiri's plan was to grow the party ranks so that it could compete in the 2015 elections. PolOff said that the party representatives' comments were reminiscent of the government line on reform - we need the international community to do it for us, and we are working for the future. At that point, the representatives turned their attention to Naimjon Samiev, the party's Regional Chairman, who had been silent during this

exchange. The representatives started to ask probing questions about what the party leadership was doing about the issues we raised.

#### THE WINTER CRISIS ISSUE

**¶9. (C)** In past years, the Islamic Revival Party has not exploited government missteps that contributed to chronic winter crises, which have included blackouts across the country and severe shortages of food. Post asked Kabiri about the party's tactics in 2008, and reported in reftel that Kabiri was hesitant to criticize the government during the crisis because it would not have helped the situation. A reporter from the weekly independent newspaper Farazh asked Kabiri a similar question in early 2009; Kabiri responded broadly and generally, saying that if the government did not improve its performance next year, the party would respond.

#### IS THE PARTY RELEVANT?

**¶10. (C)** Comment: We have witnessed at least two instances in which Islamic Revival Party members have questioned their leadership about a relatively passive approach to major issues affecting them. Davlat Usmon may not be the only person to question the party's response to the religion law's passage. During our lunch in Isfara, it appeared that Sughd party members were questioning their leadership as well. Kabiri's comments about this year's winter crisis add to the observations in reftel about the course he has chartered for his party. His refusal to capitalize on government failures during the winter seem to be at odds with his role as the leader of Tajikistan's main opposition party. President Rahmon has been fairly ruthless in coopting, or even crushing, political challengers. Kabiri is clearly reluctant to directly challenge him unless and until he feels that his party is in a stronger position, although, according to Kabiri, the party has a huge following throughout the country. Kabiri is still unwilling to take risks by taking a strong stand on major issues.

**¶11. (C)** Comment continued: The question is, how long will that growing group of followers remain patient? The passage of the religion law may bring this question to a head. In not taking a strong vocal stand prior to the law's passage, the party has opened itself up to questions about its relevance. Some party

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officials have recognized the need to do something. Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda, the party's other parliamentary representative, took the government to task for passing the law in a recent article in the party's newspaper. Other party members have been reluctant to discuss the issue, however. The conventional wisdom has been that the Islamic Revival Party has been the beneficiary of a growing religious population that is increasingly frustrated with the government. Will the party remain the political voice of religious Tajiks? End Comment.  
JACOBSON